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ABSTRACT

To have an impact on rural schools and communities, education researchers and reformers must stop approaching rural issues from an urban perspective, adopt a perspective that values rurality, and address issues specific to the rural context. Rural schools have contributed to the depletion of rural communities by focusing on individual mobility and prosperity rather than the public good. As schools have become more centralized, they have neglected their role in the life of their communities. Rural school districts usually cannot generate sufficient local resources to supplement adequately the state school finance programs the way more affluent localities can. Whether academic standards should be set by local, state, or federal entities is an issue of increasing concern. Safety and low-income student performance are enhanced in small schools, yet many rural school buildings need upgrading and access to telecommunications infrastructure. Most poor rural people are White, but rural minorities are significantly more impoverished as a percentage of the population. Changing demographics have made multicultural education issues hot topics in many rural communities. There is a shortage of rural teachers, especially in math, science, and special education, and a need for rural school leaders who can build trust in the community and incorporate community strengths into the curriculum. With regard to research, definitional inconsistencies and lack of adequate research severely limit policymakers' ability to know the effect of programs on rural schools or whether rural interests are being equitably addressed. (Contains 36 references.) (TD)

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EDUCATION ISSUES IN RURAL SCHOOLS OF AMERICA

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Education Issues in Rural Schools of America

The rural segment of American schooling is significant. In 1997-98, almost two-thirds of the more than 14,000 school districts, including some "urban" school districts with rural schools, could be considered rural (Howley, 2000). More than 45 percent of the nation's public schools are located in rural areas and small towns (Harmon, 1997; McLaughlin, et al, 1997). Almost 40 percent of the nation's public school teachers work in these rural schools (National Education Association, 1998). More than coincidently, the success or failure of these schools—including the work of well-meaning education researchers and reformers—depends greatly on understanding issues critical to schooling in rural America.

Most assuredly, how one values rural America can greatly influence how one perceives, interprets, acts on, or researches an educational issue. Craig Howley's (2001) keynote address at this conference highlights the need to conduct research in context with the rural circumstance. This paper briefly describes some key education issues that researchers and reformers are likely to encounter in many rural communities at the dawn of the new millennium.

Valuing Rural America

Rural America has been and continues to be a vital part of the Nation. Today, rural America comprises 2,288 counties. It contains 83 percent of the Nation's land and is home to 21 percent (51 million) of its people (United States Department of Agriculture, 1995). The United States, like the rest of the world, is steadily becoming more urban. The 1990 Census reveals not only that the majority (52%) of Americans live in urban areas, but also that for the first time in our history they live in areas of one million or more people

Why do people value rural areas? In the spring of 1995, scholars from a wide range of social science and humanities disciplines met to discuss the "value of rural America." Rowley (1996), writing the introduction to articles prepared from the meeting for a special issue of *Rural Development Perspectives,* notes that both pro-rural and anti-urban values are persistent and powerful in American myth, reality, and political and social discourse:

> For many people, rurality connotes intrinsic value. That value can be positive, as expressed by such rural descriptions as pastoral, bucolic, and untamed. It can be negative, as in desolate, backward, and isolated. These values have developed throughout the nation's history and are expressed in its literature, art, music, popular culture, political opinion, and residential preferences. Furthermore, Americans value rurality for what it is, what it is not, and what they believe it is or is not. (p.3)

Rural America has changed in many ways. Today, the rural economy in particular has changed—shifting from a dependence on farming, forestry, and mining to a striking diversity of economic activity. Improvements in communication and transportation have reduced rural isolation and removed many of the cultural differences between urban and rural. Television, phone service, and transportation systems have helped bring rural and urban dwellers much closer together in terms of culture, information, and lifestyles. And while it continues to provide most of the Nation's food and fiber, rural America has taken on additional roles, providing labor for industry, land for urban and suburban expansion, sites for storage of waste and hazardous activities, and natural settings for recreation and enjoyment.

In the book, *Rural Education: In Search of A Better Way*, Nachtigal (1982) maintains the important factors that differentiate a rural community in one part of the country from a community of similar size and isolation in another part of the country appear to be related to (1) the availability of economic resources, (2) cultural priorities of the local community, (3) commonality of purpose, and (4) political efficacy. Nachtigal describes some basic differences between rural and urban areas:

Rural	Urban
Personal/tightly linked	Impersonal/loosely coupled
Generalists	Specialists
Homogeneous	Heterogeneous
Nonbureaucratic	Bureaucratic
Verbal communication	Written memos
Who said it	What's said
Time measured by seasons of year	Time measured by time clock
Traditional values	Liberal values
Entrepreneur	Corporate labor force
Made do/respond to environment	Rational planning to control environment
Self-sufficiency	Leave problem solving to experts
Poorer (spendable income)	Richer (spendable income)
Less formal education	More formal education
Smaller/less density	Larger/greater density

These characteristics are reflective of the rural context. They help give meaning to researchers and reformers who sincerely seek to improve the performance of rural schools in general, and student achievement in particular. Morever, perceptions of all rural schools as inferior schools are incorrect. States with a predominance of small, community-centered schools do rather well. For example, on achieving the National Education Goals, in 1998 eight of the top ten states on math and science performance, six of the top seven on student achievement in the core subjects, and all top five on parent involvement were rural states (Lewis, 1998).

In fact, many of education's so-called "innovations" today were born out of necessity long ago in the rural school (Stern, 1994). Examples include cooperative learning, multi-grade classrooms, intimate links between school and community,

interdiscliplinary studies, peer tutoring, block scheduling, the community as the focus of study, older students teaching younger ones, site-based management, and close relationships between teachers and students. With each passing generation, however, fewer Americans, including educators, understand the significance of rural areas as places of innovation—rather, deprivation and despair characterize the perceived rural circumstance for a growing population of "urban" dwellers in a global economy.

It is tempting to generalize and oversimplify, to characterize rural areas as they once were or as they are now in only some places. Still, there is an overall pattern of economic disadvantage in many rural areas. The historical and defining features of rural economies often constrain development. Regardless of other differences, efforts to assist rural areas must take into account three common rural characteristics: (1) rural settlement patterns tend to be small in scale and low in density; (2) the natural resource-based industries on which many rural areas have traditionally depended are declining as generators of jobs and income; and (3) low-skill, low-wage rural labor faces increasingly fierce global competition.

Connecting rural America to the digital economy and raising the skills of workers and leaders will be essential to compete more effectively. A third of all rural counties captured three-fourths of all rural economic gains in the 1990s. This concentration of economic activity is the result of powerful shifts in demographics, technology, and business practices. And while rural America has often based its development on relatively low labor costs, future opportunity will be based more on skilled workers and capital investments (Drabenstott, 2000).

Contextual Issues

Issues for rural schools vary from one community to the next. Each reveals a valuable message for those seeking to understand the rural context. While not claiming to be an exhaustive list, or that one issue is more important than another, several salient issues are highlighted in this paper: namely, community vs individual well-being, schools as partners in rural development, adequate funding, setting standards, school size, school facilities, diversity and poverty, school improvement capacity, teacher recruitment and retention, leadership, policy action, and research.

Community vs Individual Well-Being. Should we assume that principals and teachers in our rural schools care about the place their students live, and the values parents hold for their children and the school? Are cultural values associated with the rural way of life at times in the way of "progressive education?" Modern society rewards individual mobility and prosperity, where "moving up" and "moving out" mean the same thing to rural youth—and many of their educators. Adults and youth who desire to stay in a rural place are usually labeled with low aspirations, persons who obviously are not considered among the "best and brightest." They refuse to seek greater personal achievement and prosperity offered in urban America. Can we have both a rural quality of life and an "urban-minded" education (Harmon and Branham, 1999)?

Researchers and education reformers that seek to always compare rural educational issues in the context (or shadow) of urban values should reflect on Howley's (2001) comments carefully. Otherwise, they should be satisfied with results of their work that yield little impact on the realities of rural schools, their students, and their communities. Haas and Nachtigal (1998) contend our country tends to measure education success by individual profit, having forgotten that the top priority of schools is to serve the public good. The philosophy of *living well* is most closely associated with the American rural way of life, a life characterized by production and sufficiency. But the chase for the *good life is* depleting community after community. Rural schools, they contend, have contributed to this process by educating students to take their places anywhere in the global economy–and ignore the fact that *anywhere* usually means *elsewhere*.

Schools as Partners in Rural Development. Advocating survival and revitalization of rural areas by building and sustaining strong linkages with local public schools is not a new idea. In the book, *Teaching the Commons: Pride, Place, and the Renewal of Community*, Theobald (1997) maintains:

> By attending to place, rural schools can begin to set a new institutional trajectory for formal education in this country. Rather than promote a simplistic agenda that can be described accurately as equipping children with the factual knowledge needed by future employers, the global economy, or the Educational Testing Service, the school could become an agent for the restoration of community. It could do this, in part, by encouraging children to explore the wisdom inherent in elevating the common good above their own individual desires. This is an idea with a long tradition in the West, an idea that has been effectively buried in this country by our feverish consumer culture. (pp. 2-3)

Many rural advocates have promoted the need for schools to "reform" in ways that build on the central role schools must play in the life of communities, as well as the individual student, if it is to be a viable institution. Otherwise, well-meaning educational reform initiatives have limited chance for success, particularly if the reform is to be

sustainable. Thinking globally and acting locally in ways that value rural places is not easy in a policy environment that seldom views community development as a traditional or essential role of "schooling." Kretzmann and McKnight remind us:

> As schools have become more professionalized and centralized, they have tended to distance themselves from their local communities. The vital links between experience, work, and education have been weakened. As a result, public and private schools in many rural and urban communities have lost their power as a valuable community resource. And many economically distressed towns, communities, and neighborhoods have begun to struggle toward economic revitalization without the valuable contributions of the local schools. (p. 209)

Former US Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley recently asked the nation to follow the example and leadership of rural communities in resisting the trend toward separation of schools from communities (Rural School & Community Trust, 1999). He challenged rural communities to lead by example in the battle to make schools the centers of community. If such leadership is to occur, policymakers must develop a better understanding of the circumstances confronting rural schools in the larger context of their communities–and develop policies that invigorate the role of schools in rural development (Harmon, in press).

Adequate funding. Rural school districts, with their modest fiscal bases, usually cannot generate sufficient local resources to supplement adequately the state school finance programs the way that more affluent localities can. Numerous supreme courts have ruled their state system of school funding as unconstitutional and have ordered new systems be developed. While equity and efficiency arguments have been prevalent in most of these cases, the current court challenges also are highlighting the need to provide a level of funding for providing "adequate" educational opportunities if students are expected to meet state-mandated standards of performance.

In reviewing school finance litigation reported by the Education Commission of the States (March, 2000), Marty Strange, director of the Policy Program for The Rural School and Community Trust, suggests 18 is an accurate count of unconstitutional state funding systems, if one includes two states (AL and MO) where a lower court ruling effectively served as a final decision because the state didn't appeal or the Supreme Court did not accept the case. The 18 states include: AL, AZ, AR, CA, CT, KY, MA, MO, MT, NH, NJ, OH, TN, TX, VT, WA, WV, WY.

States where the public school funding system has been upheld include: AK (although a lower court just ruled it unconstitutional on facilities finance, and it is headed for appeal), CO, GA, ID (new case pending on facilities), MY, MI, MN, ND (Supreme Court voted 4-3 that it was unconstitutional, but 5 votes needed to sustain a finding on unconstitutionality), NY (new lower court ruling that the system is unconstitutional, headed for long judicial and political battle), OK, OR, PA, RI, WI, VA. Also, in three of

the states where the court overturned the funding system (AZ, OH, WA) it had earlier upheld it in another case. New court cases that focus on facilities alone are active in AK, AZ, NM, CO, ID.

Setting standards. Americans want schools where students must meet some "standard" of achievement. But who sets the standard is a critical issue being debating in rural schools and their communities. Local versus state (or federal) control of public schools is at the center of the controversy of setting standards. Rural schools and community advocates such as The Rural School and Community Trust, for example, believe that standards should originate within the community in which the students live. Others argue that it is the state that should set standards because local schools in some rural areas traditionally have low expectations for student achievement, as well as taxpayers with low interest in funding "high standards for all students."

Some rural interests argue also that rural communities cannot afford to fund the requirements for state-mandated standards, and school consolidation–in the name of fiscal efficiency–is the likely result. On the other hand, some policymakers also believe federal and state interests in having an educated citizenry for competing in a global economy compels standards be set at the state level, with the local schools having flexibility to decide "how to teach" the content, rather than "what to teach."

For the first time in our nation's history, nearly all states have developed standards for public education. The 31st annual Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup poll of the public's attitude toward public schools (Rose and Gallup, 1999) reveals that of the approximately 1,100 people participating in telephone interviews (25% representing a rural community):

- A majority (57%) believes that the standards currently in place are about right
- A strong minority (33%) believe the standards are too low
- Almost half of the non-whites (48%) and urban dweller (43%) are the groups most likely to feel standards are too low
- Only 3% of the respondents in rural America thought the standards were too high, 63% thought they were just about right, and 29% thought they were too low (5% "didn't know")

Kannapel (2000) believes some middle ground exists between those who advocate state-level determination of standards and those who believe local communities should set the standards. This debate will likely accelerate as state funding formulas for public education and high stakes testing and accountability play out in the context of what is considered "adequate" educational opportunities and who pays the bill. Charter schools and other forms of public education "choice" may also play a role in whether "community schools" survive or thrive in the new millennium. Intertwined also in the issue is how the rhetoric of parent and community involvement becomes reality, or whether public education is reduced to serving only certain segments of the public (e.g., the impoverished).

School size. The majority of schools in rural setting are small, enrolling fewer than 400 students. Only 2 percent have enrollments exceeding 1,200 students. Research reveals that a high school with an enrollment of 400 students is able to offer a reasonably comprehensive curriculum, and that a high school ought not to enroll more than 600 to 1,000 students. Schools with high populations of students from low-income families do best academically in small schools.

Public concerns regarding school safety issues also reinforce the need for small schools, where teachers know students well, and students have a feeling of belonging in the school and community (Howley, 2000). The book, *Small High Schools That Flourish: Rural Context, Case Studies and* Resources (Howley and Harmon, 2000), profiles four small high schools in the U.S. that have accepted the challenge of taking their own paths to serve students and their communities well.

School facilities. While rural schools may be located in some of America's most beautiful areas, in 1996 about 4.6 million rural students were attending schools in inadequate buildings (National Education Association, 1998). Three out of ten rural and small town schools have inadequate buildings. One in two schools have at least one inadequate building feature. Approximately one-half have unsatisfactory environmental conditions in the buildings. Thirty percent of schools in rural areas report at least one inadequate building. Fifty-two percent of rural schools report at least one inadequate building feature, such as a roof, foundation, or plumbing (U.S. GAO, 1996). Approximately 37 percent have inadequate science laboratory facilities, 40 percent have inadequate space for large-group instruction, and 13 percent report an inadequate library/media center (U.S. GAO, 1995).

Technology needs also force building modifications. Many older schools lack conduits for computer-related cables, electrical wiring for computers and other communications technology, or adequate electrical outlets. Without the necessary infrastructure, however, schools cannot use technology to help overcome historical barriers associated with ruralness and isolation. In 1990, $2.6 billion was estimated to be needed for funding maintenance on existing buildings and almost $18 billion to replace obsolete rural schools. The issue of funding rural school facilities continues to receive high interests among policymakers (Dewees and Hammer, 2000; Dewees, 1999). Wireless" technology obviously will introduce new issues as rural communities debate the desire and affordability of renovating or building schools in rural areas.

Diversity and poverty. Addressing issues of education in rural areas include confronting the realities of people in poverty and the growing diversity of rural America. A special report on socioeconomic conditions in rural America by the United States Department of Agriculture (February, 1999) reveals the circumstances of who lives in rural areas.

Geographic diversity best defines the issue of diversity in rural America. Using 1990 Census data, 333 of the 2,288 rural counties have a minority group that makes up one-third of the population. These counties contain only 12 percent of the total rural population. However, they are geographically clustered according to the residents' race

or ethnic group. Multicultural education issues are "hot topics" in many rural communities today.

Rural minorities often live in geographically isolated communities where poverty is high, opportunity is low, and the economic benefits deprived from education and training are limited. Rural counties with one-third or more Black population are found only in the South. Native American (American Indian, Alaskan Native) counties are clustered in three areas: the northern High Plains, the Four Corners region in the Southwest, and Alaska. Most of the Hispanic counties lie near the Rio Grande River, from its headwaters in southern Colorado to the Gulf of Mexico. Hispanics are the fastest growing rural minority group. Agricultural areas in Washington, ski resorts in Colorado, and meat packing centers in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa have seen new or greatly expanded Hispanic settlements in the 1990s.

According to a task force on persistent poverty of the Rural Sociological Society (Summers and Sherman, 1997), nearly 10 million poor people live in rural America, almost one in every five rural residents. A "poverty gap" exists between rural minorities and the white population. Rural minorities are significantly more impoverished as a percentage of the population. The overwhelming majority, however, of poor people living in rural America are white (72.9 percent). Less than one-fourth are African Americans (23.6 percent) and Hispanics make up only 5.4 percent of the total. Less than 5 percent are Native Americans. These facts contradict the widely held notion that poverty in the United States is a minority problem. These people are the "working poor" in rural America.

Addressing educational opportunities and results will require solutions to both the poverty gap of minority groups and the persistent impoverished conditions of all rural poor, especially those who work for low wages. This is no easy task, as "…social problems are seen as having their origin in political and economic structures beyond the control of most people who live in rural America" (Moore, 2001, p. 13).

School improvement capacity. Major initiative in the 1990s, such as the National Science Foundation Rural Systemic Initiative, the federal government's Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program, the Annenberg Foundation's Rural Challenge (now the Rural School and Community Trust), and the US Department of Education's Regional Educational Laboratory program have each in their own way attempted to give targeted assistance to rural school systems.

Increasingly, rural school districts are relying on regional educational service agencies (ESAs) as vital partners in school improvement efforts. In the book, *Expanding the Vision: New Roles for Educational Service Agencies in Rural School District Improvement*, Stephens (1998) calls on ESAs to pursue strategic goals that will enable them to be the first-line school improvement support for their rural school districts. ESAs are particularly important in giving rural schools the capacity to educate students with special and exceptional learning needs. The Association of Educational Service

Agencies (AESA) is the national professional organization serving education service agencies (ESAs) in 33 states.

Teacher recruitment and retention. Attracting and retaining quality teachers will be critical in creating and implementing higher standards for student academic achievement (Harmon, 2001). According to the report "The Supply and Demand of Elementary and Secondary School Teachers in the United States," for the 1998-99 school year, there were 2,780,074 teachers in public schools. More than a million of those teachers (approximately 40 percent) were in the six states of California, Florida, Illinois, New York, Ohio, and Texas. These six states also have almost 1,400 rural school districts. The number of elementary and secondary school teachers is projected to increase by 1.1 percent annually to a total of 3.46 million by the year 2008. Urban and poor communities will have the greatest need for teachers, with more than 700,000 additional teachers needed in the next decade.

The rural teacher shortage affects all subject areas but particularly math, science, and special education. According to the National Association of State Boards of Education, an adequate number of teachers are trained each year. The problem is with distribution. Causes for a teacher shortage in rural areas include: social and cultural isolation, poor pay and salary differentials, limited teacher mobility, lack of personal privacy, rigid lockstep salary schedules and monetary practices, luring of teachers away by higher paying private sector businesses and industries, strict teacher certification practices and tests, lack of reciprocal certification to enable teaching in another state, recruitment cost (time/costs to gather information), and a high rate of teacher turnover (Harmon, 2001).

In 1998, the National Education Association used data primarily from studies conducted by federal agencies to describe public education in rural areas and small towns compared to central city schools and urban fringe schools. A few of the comparisons were

☛ Of the approximately 2.56 million public school teachers, approximately 40 percent are in rural and small town schools. Compared to teachers in central city schools and urban fringe schools, rural teachers tend to be less well educated, slightly less experienced, younger, and less likely to belong to a minority group. Rural school principals are more likely to be male and less likely to belong to a minority group compared to principals in central city schools and urban fringe schools.

☛ Teachers of rural and small town schools spend more time being with students at school and outside school hours, have smaller incomes, and are less likely to have benefits of medical insurance, dental insurance, group life insurance, and pension contributions.

☛ Teachers in rural and small town schools perceive student use of alcohol to be a more serious problem, and less likely to perceive a serious problem in student absenteeism, tardiness, verbal abuse of teachers, and student disrespect for teachers. Teachers in rural

schools are less likely than teachers in central city schools, but more likely than teachers in urban fringe schools to perceive poverty as a serious problem in their schools.

Leadership. The most critical issues in managing and running small rural school districts are finances, regional economic conditions, state regulations, salaries, and providing an adequate variety of classes. The greatest turnover among superintendents occurs among the smallest districts, those with fewer than 300 students. An environment of high stakes testing and increasing public accountability for student and school success is placing a premium on persons that can effectively lead schools (and school districts).

Chalker (1999) points out in the book, *Leadership for Rural Schools: Lessons for All Educators*, that being an effective principal in a rural area means building positive relationships with the people in the rural community. The school in the rural community is still a respected institution, with a lot more focus on "people" than on "business."

Building trust and finding ways to make the curriculum incorporate the strengths of the community are key features of successful school leaders in rural areas. In the decades ahead, leading rural schools and school systems in ways that contribute to community and economic development appear essential for sustaining a prosperous school and community in much of rural America.

Policy action. Lack of a precise demographic "rural" definition frustrates those who work in setting educational policy. In 2000, and for the first time in history, an organization–The Rural School and Community Trust–systematically attempted to gauge and describe the relative importance of rural education in each state. This first effort used both *Importance* and *Urgency* gauges. Results reveal a cluster of seven states where rural education is crucial to the state's educational performance and where the need for attention is great: Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Kentucky, West Virginia, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

These states are in regions that are chronically depressed, suffer large areas of out-migration, and are deeply distressed by changes in the global economy. Louisiana, Montana, and Oklahoma round out the top ten states where rural education is important and needs for policy action are urgent. The fact that 25 states now have affiliate organizations with the National Rural Education Association also reflects the growing trend for rural education interests to unite and seek solutions to public education issues.

Research. DeYoung (1991) points out in the book, *Rural Education: Issues and Practices*, that rural educational issues rarely attract the attention of prestigious colleges of education and their professorates. Part of the reason is that rural areas are places with traditions and cultures of labor and of working, rather than demand for intellectual understanding and for abstract scholarship. Scholarship on rural education is relatively underdeveloped in the United States (DeYoung, 1987).

In the report to The Rural School and Community Trust, *Where Has All the 'Rural' Gone? Rural Education Research and Current Federal Reform*, Sherwood (2001) points out:

> ... intense study of rural schools has suffered from a lack of consistent support by government and academic institutions, largely due to: 1) lack of appreciation for urban-rural differences; 2) lack of academic appeal comparable to the excitement generated for urban work; 3) relatively little networking in the professional and research communities around rural education research; 4) a paucity of professionals devoting their careers to continuous study of rural education; 5) longstanding lack of consensus concerning rural education's domain and research priorities; and, finally, 6) a lack of the sense of crisis associated with urban schools, and the accompanying focus by policy makers. (p. 3)

Sherwood (2001) reports that the challenges of rural research appear enmeshed in demographics, politics and diminishing returns. Federal education R&D Centers are usually located at major universities in metropolitan areas. Sherwood (2001) concludes:

> A summer 2000 review of research project descriptions and titles available on centers' web pages revealed one study focusing exclusively on rural issues, and few that contained any mention of "rural" at all. Even among those studies showing interest in rural education, the attention appeared cursory. One study claimed to explore contrasts between "schools serving relatively affluent, suburban communities and schools thought to be potentially at risk: those serving inner-city, economically disadvantaged communities and those in more geographically remote rural areas." The study examined nine inner-city schools, compared with only two rural ones "because inner-city students were considered most at risk." (p. 5)

In 1996, rural education researchers Harmon, Howley, and Sanders reported in the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* that 196 doctoral dissertations were written between 1989 and 1993 on the topic of rural education. Since 1997, the US Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement has operated Regional Educational Laboratories authorized by federal law to devote 25 percent of their funding to meeting the needs of rural schools, part of which has been the conduct of applied research. In 1996, the Education Department designated one of the labs as the Rural Education Specialty on behalf of the network of labs, a practice that ended in 2001 with the start of a new five-year contact for the regional educational laboratories lab program.

Sherwood (2001) also comments on this phenomenon:

> Under the 1996 contract, 25 percent of the entire lab program budget was to be dedicated to rural district services, a stipulation

> that survives in the 2001 agreement. Yet, the Department of Education has been hard-put to show adequate monitoring of this spending guideline. While ORAD can point to some impressive rural programs by individual labs (which are obligated to assess their own services to rural constituencies), there is currently no coordinated dissemination of rural-specific lab products to rural districts, no close monitoring of funds dedicated to "rural" at the national level, no coordinated nationwide effort of "rural" as an object of examination, nor any national program focusing exclusively on rural education issues. (p. 10)

Inadequate attention to research in rural education is an issue of local, state, regional, and national interest—and an issue likely to become more critical as increasing accountability and results are expected from public investments in education. Stern (1994) notes:

> Lack of adequate research and impact evaluations, together with definitional inconsistencies severely limit policy makers' ability to know either the effect of federal, state, and local programs on rural schools or whether rural interests are being equitably addressed. Until this deficiency is corrected, policy making on behalf of rural students will be impeded." (p. 31)

Conclusion

Addressing educational issues of public schools in rural America will require thoughtful research and reform-minded assistance that differentiates between the "old story" of rural education and the emerging "new story" (Haas (1990), a paradigm change that combines rural education and the rural economy in a way that strengthens them both. The old story reflects society's continuing shift from agriculture to industry and from industry to information. It suggests that rural schools have two purposes, to educate students either as participants in communities that are perpetually dependent on natural resources, or to take their places in urban industrial America. The result has been steady decline for most rural communities, particularly those not adjacent to an urban area, as America enjoyed its greatest economic prosperity in history.

If rhetoric can become reality, opportunities for a new story of public schools and their communities forming partnerships for prosperity may be on the horizon. The education agenda of "No Child Left Behind" being advocated by President George W. Bush—who was clearly elected by carrying the votes of "rural" states—holds promise for closing the educational disparities and achievement gaps prevalent in rural schools of America. The debate is starting in states and communities is regarding how such an agenda is likely to impact funding, accountability, and community control of local rural schools.

The "new story" says the mission of rural education is to meet student needs while addressing community needs. Promise exists for improving opportunities for rural children and communities as rural schools adapt to changing economics, demographics, and societal expectations. Key characteristics of rural education in the new story are decentralization, diversity, low bureaucracy, parent and community engagement, evolving higher academic standards and outcomes, continuous improvement, high value for flexible generalists, small scale (small, safe and caring schools), and technology enhanced.

Innovations in telecommunications increase the capacity of rural schools to give students, educators, and the community access to enormous educational opportunities and connections to the outside world, regardless of geographic location in America. While the curriculum rural schools offer may be "place-based," one's employment opportunities and life's work in the near future may no longer require moving away or commuting long distances to a place of work. The Internet and other technologies make working and living in rural America a viable option, particularly for those with lifelong learning and entrepreneurial skills.

Schools should provide educational opportunities and linkages for students who choose to stay in rural America, as well as for those who leave. Local school boards have an important role to play to establish policies that reconnect schools and communities. Democratic schools with limited bureaucracy will be prevalent in the "new story" of rural education. Curriculum and assessment will be redesigned for authentic, relevant learning. Course delivery, with rigor and relevance for all students, will more closely reflect learning situations students experience throughout their lives. Teachers are highly qualified generalists trained to help students (and each other) find and use information, feel safe, and care about their place of residence (rural or urban). Schedules fit the task. School facilities fit the community's needs. And interdisciplinary research builds the bridges of best practices for rural schools, their students, and their communities to prosper in the 21st century.

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